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SUBJECT: MENINGITIS OUTBREAK REPORTED IN KISANGANI,
ORIENTALE PROVINCE, DR CONGO

1. This report was prepared by the Office of Centers for Disease Control (CDC) of Amembassy Kinshasa and has been cleared by the Embassy's Front Office.

2. In late November Kisangani, the capital city of the Oriental Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was hit by a meningitis epidemic. Laboratory tests performed at the National Institute of Biomedical Research in Kinshasa (capital of the DRC) identified Meningococcus type C as the cause of this outbreak. In one month at least 200 cases (including 45 deaths) have been reported as a result of this epidemic.

3. Meningitis is an inflammation of the protective membrane covering the brain and spinal cord, and is most often caused by a bacterial or viral infection. Several bacteria are responsible for meningitis: Pneumococcus, Hemophilus Influenzae, and the most frequent -- Meningococcus (Neisseria meningitidis).

4. The bacteria can be spread from person to person through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions. Meningitis strikes most frequently the sub-Saharan region. There is a well known area called the "belt of meningitis," extending from Senegal in the West to Ethiopia in the East. The DRC is, unfortunately, in the middle of this "belt."

5. During the dry season (June to November), this disease periodically affects hundreds of people. There are several safe vaccines, most of which have been available for more than 30 years, which are highly effective in preventing meningitis.

6. The medical team responding to this outbreak consists of a provincial health office and a Non-Governmental Organization: Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF).

7. Presently, the number of cases is declining and the outbreak appears to be under control. However, there are some reports of new cases northeast of the epicenter, which the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa is closely monitoring. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) based in the DRC is in contact with the Congolese Ministry of Health and has assured the Ministry that technical assistance will be provided if the epidemic continues. In the meantime, CDC recommends that the vaccine for Meningitis be made available to all Americans traveling or operating in the area of the outbreak.

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